

Recycling food scraps into energy? It's about to start becoming routine in Orange County

Jan. 18, 2016 | Updated Jan. 22, 2016 5:43 p.m.



Workers from CR&R Environmental Services unload the new organics recycling trash bins from a truck on Continental Avenue that Costa Mesa residents will use to recycle food scraps, as well as green waste (yard clippings).

FILE: STEVEN GEORGES, CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

**By Jordan Graham/
Staff Writer**

COSTA MESA – It required a wholesale change in thinking for Shawna Rousseau to view discarded chicken bones and vegetable stems as something that still held value.

But six months after the Costa Mesa Sanitary District launched the first municipal organics recycling program in Southern California, Rousseau, 42, now sees separating old food from the rest of her garbage – so it eventually can be turned into energy – as just another part of normal life.

Most Costa Mesa residents apparently feel the same.

Two-thirds of the city's single-family households have begun saving and separating their leftovers since the program began in late June, according to a recent UC Irvine study. And the sanitary district intends to use the results of that study to get more people into the program, promoting food recycling as the new normal.

In its first six months, the district's program prevented more than 7 million pounds of food waste and yard clippings from going to landfills, sending it instead to a compost pile in Victorville.

And beginning next month, that organic material will be trucked to a new anaerobic digester – a \$25 million facility in Perris owned by Stanton-based CR&R Waste and Recycling Service. There, the digester will churn the brew into clean-burning biogas, used to power the very trucks that hauled the waste in the first place.

“I hadn’t spent a whole lot of time thinking about our garbage, but this (program) changed that,” said Rousseau, a project manager at an employee training company who has lived in Costa Mesa for 16 years.

“It’s (now) my normal train of thought as to what I do. And if it helps the environment, why not adopt it?”

That attitude – and Costa Mesa’s quick adaptation to new habits – bodes well for a practice that represents the next step in keeping residents’ trash out of landfills. CR&R, the trash hauler that contracts with the Costa Mesa Sanitary District and runs the organics-recycling program, is hoping food-scrap recycling will become popular in large swaths of Orange County.

The waste services company collects residents’ trash in 14 Orange County cities. Costa Mesa and Stanton have already signed on for organics recycling, and Dean Ruffridge, senior vice president with CR&R, says Aliso Viejo, San Clemente and Laguna Nigel are close to agreements for the new service.

Nine other cities, he said, have expressed some interest – including Dana Point, Lake Forest, Newport Beach, Orange, Tustin, Laguna Hills, Rancho Santa Margarita, San Juan Capistrano and La Habra.

The two biggest concerns Ruffridge hears from these cities and sanitary districts are timing (CR&R’s Perris facility has limited space until it expands) and cost (the service costs households an extra \$1.30-\$5 per month, depending on the city).

But many municipalities are looking to act soon. A state law that takes effect in 2019 will essentially force cities to keep green waste out of landfills. The state has set a goal of diverting 75 percent of waste from landfills, and the California Air Resources Board announced in September it would consider regulations to eliminate all organics from landfills by 2025.

For Costa Mesa residents, the concern has been whether the now voluntary food-scrap recycling program would be burdensome. Would keeping food scraps out of the trash bin be too much work? Would it smell? Would it attract bugs?

Residents are still split over those questions.

Patti Ferguson said she put her yard clippings in her new green bin, but doesn’t recycle food scraps because she fears the container would get “smelly and gross.”

Some residents on a Costa Mesa Facebook page recently traded tips on how to combat the smell – buy compostable bags, freeze your waste until you take it out to the bin, transfer your scraps from your kitchen pail to your outdoor bin daily. Others complained that the new system was simply too much work.

Even Rousseau said she stopped recycling her meal leftovers during a recent fall heat wave, claiming the smell became too rank.

But according to the UC Irvine study, those concerns haven’t stopped locals from changing their habits.

Sally Geislar, a UC Irvine doctoral student who created and ran the study, said that one of the most powerful tools in convincing people to opt in could be something called “norm communication” – the

idea that people are more likely to adopt a new practice if they think most of their neighbors are doing it too.

For example, 50 years ago dog walkers weren't expected to carry plastic bags to pick up after their pets. Today, anybody spotted not picking up after their dog would be violating the new social norm, and might even get a public scolding.

While food-scrap recycling is relatively new, Geislar found that Costa Mesa residents responded to norm communication nonetheless. When she told some people in the study that most residents recycle their food scraps, food recycling jumped from 66 percent to 77 percent among that group.

"The more that we can highlight that people are adopting this new behavior, the more likely people will be willing to participate," said Geislar, from UCI's Department of Planning, Policy and Design.

Geislar said the Costa Mesa Sanitary District is the first municipality that she knows of to test how "norm communication" affects peoples' food-waste management.

Geislar initially proposed the idea for the study just to the district, but eventually received funding from the district, UC Irvine and external grants. It involved 1,035 households and lasted six months.

Scott Carroll, general manager of the Costa Mesa Sanitary District, said the district would use the insight gained from the study to better communicate with locals. District representatives met last week with the coordinator for OC Waste & Recycling to share the study's findings.

Food scrap recycling has its detractors, and the program still has its flaws. Organics recycling is difficult in apartment buildings, and it hasn't been widely adopted in large complexes. Food scraps from residences makes up a small portion of total trash produced, and some don't think the extra effort is worth what's saved.

Resident Andy Smith and former Costa Mesa Sanitary District board member Jim Fitzpatrick both pointed out that CR&R benefits from residents' front-end sorting by selling less-tainted recyclables, and said the company should be sharing that revenue with customers through more favorable contracts.

But if Geislar's study is correct, food recycling soon could be something Orange County residents regard as part of their daily routine.

"We adapted really easily," said Joyce Sandison, 84. "As far as I'm concerned, it's working out really well."

Contact the writer: jgraham@ocregister.com or 714-796-7960

